Slow-Motion Torture

How solitary confinement – once reserved for the most dangerous and disobedient inmates – became standard practice in American prisons

BY JEFF TIETZ

SIXTEEN YEARS INTO A 26-YEAR sentence for taking part in an armed robbery and murder, Brian Nelson was sent to Tamms Correctional Center, in southern Illinois. The reason for his transfer remains unclear. Tamms is a supermax, or solitary confinement facility. Inmates there spend 23 hours a day alone in bare cells whose perforated steel doors face a blank wall. Nelson was self-evidently neither a threat to himself nor to others, with no history of psychiatric problems, but he spent the next 12 years at Tamms. ■ Within the institutional culture of the modern prison system, solitary confinement is not considered a radically damaging means of detention. Once reserved

ILLUSTRATION BY MATT MAHURIN

primarily for violent or disruptive inmates, it has become a managerial tactic, without standard limits on duration. Prisoners may spend decades in solitary cells the size of a large closet. There are currently more than 80,000 inmates in long-term solitary confinement in the U.S. – far more than any other country in the world. Supermax inmates are often provided reading material and a radio or TV, and they frequently communicate with one another by yelling through their cell doors. But they are not permitted to touch, converse naturally with, or occupy the same space as other human beings.

Within months of arriving at Tamms, Nelson became depressed. He rarely slept. He was losing weight rapidly, having panic attacks, pacing compulsively. In solitary, pacing is not uncommon – inmates have worn tracks in the concrete floors of their cells. At Tamms, as at most supermaxes, prisoners have access to a small, concrete-walled exercise pen with a half-roof – the only space into which the natural world can leak. For 30 minutes each day, Nelson found a measure of solace there. The pen's windowless walls were 20 feet high, but he could see a rectangle of sky. Looking up, he would try to will planes and birds into view. He discovered that if he lay on his stomach and looked through an inch-wide drainpipe, he could discern blades of grass at the other end. Sometimes, thrillingly, an insect would make its way through the blades. Spiders occasionally wove webs in the yard, and Nelson would catch flies and drop them into the webs. The ensuing drama would transport him. "It sounds weird," Nelson says, "but if you catch a spider, you have a cellie." An inmate at a supermax in California kept a family of spiders in his cell, observing life cycles across generations. At another supermax, an inmate tried to rescue a moth by stitching together its broken wing with a strand of his own hair.

Before he had spent a full year at Tamms, Nelson stopped sleeping altogether. He was pacing 18 hours a day. He wore out the soles of his cloth shoes every 30 days. Blood blisters covered the heels and balls of his feet. Every two weeks, he was escorted to the infirmary so the medical staff could drain and clean the blisters. Afterward, he would pull on his socks and shoes, walk back to his cell and begin pacing again. Fresh blood would soon flow over the residue of dried blood within the blisters, dampening his socks and shoes.

"I paced so much – I paced and read," Nelson says. "I knew the number of steps so well that I knew when to turn around and walk the other way, and I never took my eyes off the page. Even sudoku. It just becomes natural. Seven and a half steps here, seven and a half steps there."

Nelson and I are sitting in nylon camping chairs on the back deck of his girlfriend Belinda's walk-up apartment in Chicago. It is dusk. Adjacent buildings incidentally form a concrete courtyard; four or five flights of fire escapes loom above us. Hanging plants and a wind chime swing in a faint breeze. Kids are playing soccer on the other side of an old wooden fence dividing the courtyard. The smell of dryer sheets drifts up from the apartment laundry room.

> **"What happened to me in that cell tore me down. I scream at night. In my dreams, I'm back in that cell."**

Nelson is 48, sturdily built, around five feet nine, with a pale, clean-shaved head and a pale round face and eyes that are big and bright but evince troubled sleep. He is wearing a crisp black Harley-Davidson T-shirt, black jeans and black Air Jordans.

"This is my little corner out here," he'd said when we first sat down. He was at the edge of the deck, which was at the edge of the courtyard – he could survey the whole scene, with nothing behind him. "Nobody can get to me in my corner. I have to have the light off so no one can see me out here – one of my paranoia traits."

Two years after his release, Nelson is working as a paralegal at a prisoners' rights firm called the Uptown People's Law Center. He has a stable place to live. He's in a stable relationship. These are exceptional accomplishments for someone who spent so long in solitary, but complete readjustment remains at the edge of the possible.

"I get scared out here in the world," he says. "I get real scared. Everything is so fast – everything is congested, with no space for me. Once I step outside, it's everybody's space." In crowded rooms he needs the refuge of a corner, and even then anxiety often overcomes him and he has to bolt.

Every time he enters an unfamiliar house, he counts its light fixtures and speakers – a reflex developed in Tamms. ("Two things you do in solitary: pace and count," he says.) Soon after he was released, he began working with his brother, an electrician, and on their commute from the exurbs to Chicago he noted every change in the billboard lineup – a function of hypervigilance bred in solitary. For hours after something reminds him of Tamms, he sees the perforations of his cell door, like the afterimage of a dull sun, every time he closes his eyes. Once, after an interview, a reporter asked him how he felt. "I'm in my cell," he said. "You could show me anything in the world you want, but I'm in my cell. It's all I knew, and I can't get it out of my head."

Nelson's psychological devolution remains largely incomprehensible to him, and he isn't always able to distinguish between the past and the present. "What happened to me in that cell tore me down," he says. "When I talk about it, I cry. I don't understand what happened, because it was my own mind hurting me. I have a fear that I've gone crazy and this life isn't real – I feel like that every day. I scream at night, real bad, because in my dreams I'm back in that cell. And if I am so crazy that I'm back in that cell, I'll kill myself. I couldn't do it anymore."

NO ONE ESCAPES SOLITARY confinement unscathed. "Everyone who is in a supermax has some kind of psychological damage as a result," researcher and psychiatrist Terry Kupers has stated in a deposition. Kupers is one of a small number of experts on the psychological impact of solitary confinement. He has interviewed nearly a thousand inmates in supermax segregation. "I've never found anyone who's not damaged by the experience," he has testified. Not long ago, a group of researchers reviewed what has become a sizable medical literature on the effects of isolation cells. They found that no study on long-term solitary – three months or more – had ever failed to reveal "serious psychiatric symptoms" in inmates.

Solitary confinement amounts to a sentence within a sentence, yet judges almost never place a convict in an isolation cell. Such assignments are made extrajudicially, by prison officials, without appeal to any authority beyond the correctional system. Supermaxes were originally designed to confine incorrigibly violent prisoners and leaders of criminal organizations who would otherwise be orchestrating murders

Contributing editor JEFF TIETZ *wrote "The Fallen" in RS 1160/1161.*

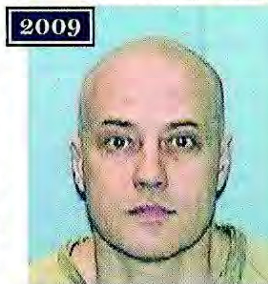
Caged and Alone

Inmates at supermax prisons like Tamms remain in their cells for 23 hours a day, with no human contact. Meals are delivered through the drawer attached to the cell door.

inside and outside of prison, and corrections officials insist that they are diligent in selecting those they place in solitary. "We only wanted people directly linked to violence within a facility," says a former supermax warden who used a multilayered classification process to screen prisoners. Greg Lewis, the warden of Pelican Bay, a supermax prison in Northern California, says that his solitary unit almost exclusively houses gang members. To determine whether an inmate poses a sufficiently severe threat to warrant segregation, Lewis relies on "probably the most highly trained gang investigators in the state."

But diligence is far from uniform, and thousands of inmates across the country have been placed in long-term solitary for disobeying orders, throwing food, exhibiting symptoms of psychosis, filing lawsuits against prison officials or striking other inmates in self-defense. Wardens in many supermax prisons, the Justice Department reported in 1999, place prisoners in solitary "without application of objective criteria or verified misconduct." The report explicitly warned against solitary confinement for inmates who are mentally ill, disobedient or "situationally assaultive." Those warnings have gone largely unheeded. A decade later, an analysis of records from the Illinois Department of Corrections revealed that 138 of 247 inmates at Tamms had never been convicted of a crime while in prison; 55 others were confined to solitary for possession of contraband or for assaults that resulted in no serious physical harm. Many of the acts were directly attributable to psychiatric conditions.

"As comforting as it may be to an institution staff to be rid of such persons," the Justice Department noted, supermax facilities "are inappropriate" and "may subject them to pressures detrimental to their physical and psychological health." The ACLU's National Prison Project asserts that more than half of all prisoners in solitary confinement are either "mentally ill" or "cognitively disabled."



TAKING A TOLL
Brian Nelson paced for 18 hours a day during his stint at Tamms.

In 2005, a man named Stephen Slevin was arrested for drunken driving in New Mexico. Perceived to be mentally ill, he was held in a padded room for three days before being transferred to solitary confinement, where he remained for two years. According to Slevin's lawyer, it was standard practice at the prison to permanently segregate the mentally ill from other inmates. Of Slevin's mental state when he got out, his lawyer said, "He is totally inequipped; he is hollow. They have removed his humanity from him." In 2010, Cameron Douglas, son of actor Michael Douglas, was sentenced to 60 months in a New York prison for drug dealing. He was a heroin addict, but received no treatment for his addiction. When guards caught him with a small amount of drugs, he was placed in solitary confinement for a year. As in New Mexico, depriving prisoners of human contact – one of the most extreme forms of punishment available to corrections officials – had become routine.

MODERN-ERA SOLITARY confinement was born of desperation. Its origins can be traced to the early 1970s, when crime rates were rising and street gangs were multiplying. In state and federal penitentiaries across the country, overcrowding was endemic and violent unrest common; gangs began exerting overwhelming influence within facilities. "The inmates were running these prisons," recalls Jeanne Woodford, former director of the California Department of Corrections. "There were just so many of them." Between 1971 and 1973, guards were taken hostage three times in separate prison riots nationwide, and 10 guards were killed during the notorious uprising at Attica state prison in New York.

Wardens had been employing a tactic known as "dispersion" to deal with violent and subversive inmates – transferring them to other prisons to lessen their influence. But as the prison population boomed, the tactic proved unworkable. "If I disperse 20 problem inmates across 20 prisons, now I might have 20 problem facilities," says Michael Randle, a former director of the Illinois Department of Corrections. The Federal Bureau of Prisons decided that order could best be maintained systemwide not by dispersion but by concentration. In 1973, it built a special control unit at its penitentiary in Marion, Illinois, and began shipping its highest-risk inmates there.

The plan didn't work. In 1983, in two separate attacks on the same day, gang members in the control unit at Marion stabbed two guards to death. The warden locked down the prison indefinitely. Inmates were confined to their cells for 23 hours a day, and all communal activities were terminated. The Bureau of Prisons eventually decided that the concentration method would work only if prisoners were permanently segregated from one another.

FROM TOP: JOHN SMIERCIAK/"CHICAGO TRIBUNE"/MCT/LANDOV; COURTESY OF THE ILLINOIS DEPARTMENT OF CORRECTIONS, 2

In 1994, the bureau completed a solitary confinement facility in Florence, Colorado; it remains the lone federal supermax.

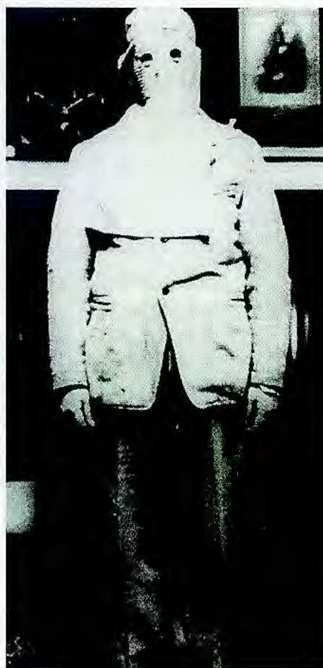
State prison officials quickly followed suit – even though the new prisons were expensive to build and operate. According to Woodford, the sheer number of dividing walls required unprecedented amounts of concrete. Supermaxes depend on sophisticated security and surveillance systems and far more manpower than maximum-security prisons. Monitoring is continuous, Woodford says, and supermaxes have been a "huge factor" in rising prison costs: "The services have to be delivered to the inmate, or the inmate has to be delivered to the services, usually by two guards." In Illinois, it costs $61,522 a year to keep a prisoner in solitary, compared with $22,000 for other prisoners.

But such outsize costs did not deter politicians from promoting supermaxes to a crime-fatigued nation. State legislators, and at least one governor, pushed to build supermaxes even when prison officials did not ask for them. Michael Randle, who worked as a senior corrections official in Ohio during the supermax boom, says he would have been laughed at if he'd gone before the state legislature and asked for more funding for drug treatment programs. But if he'd asked for a supermax, he says, the response would have been, "How about two?" By 2005, more than 40 states were operating supermax prisons or solitary confinement wings within existing facilities.

Corrections officials argue that supermaxes limit the havoc wreaked by violent inmates and gang leaders. Even a reform-minded official like Randle, who has been disturbed by data about the psychological effects of solitary confinement, believes that supermaxes are necessary for controlling a system's worst offenders. "Because these types of facilities exist," he says, "the rest of the prison system is a lot safer."

But it is unclear whether supermaxes actually reduce prison violence. At the first-ever congressional hearing on solitary confinement, which took place this past summer, senators heard testimony from Christopher Epps, commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Corrections. When the state recently cut the number of prisoners in solitary by 75 percent, Epps reported, overall violence dropped by half. The Maine Department of Corrections has begun a similar reduction, with similar results.

Those reversals, however, come two decades after corrections officials began placing thousands of prisoners in solitary confinement. During the supermax boom years, politicians and prison officials expressed no interest in alternatives, and the mass transfer of inmates into solitary occurred without close scrutiny. Legislators had no political incentive to set up monitoring regimes, impose limits on the lengths of solitary terms or establish strict criteria for placement in solitary facilities. Prisons, by and large, were left to their own devices.



"Horrible Despair"

Built in 1829, Eastern State (above) pioneered the use of solitary. Inmates wore hoods (right) so they would never see the face of another prisoner.

In 1995, a few years before he was sent to Tamms, Brian Nelson was transferred from a state prison in Illinois to the Southern New Mexico Correctional Facility in Las Cruces. The move was part of an interstate program that seeks to reduce prison violence by removing problem inmates from dangerous environments. In Illinois, Nelson had nearly been killed three times. He was jumped and badly beaten with a pipe, and later with a section of rebar; finally, someone came at him with a shiv. Nelson was able to seize the weapon and stab his attacker before guards intervened.

Although Nelson received a negative inmate classification from Illinois prison officials, which prompted the transfer, they apparently did not consider him a serious threat: The facility in New Mexico was minimum security. In his three years there, Nelson became a tailor and gained the trust of prison officials, who afforded him near-total freedom of movement. He walked around carrying shears and scissors. His cell was rarely locked for more than an hour, and only for inmate counts. A practicing Catholic, he stopped by the prison chapel regularly. He picnicked with visiting family in the prison's park. And he collected car keys from prison guards and hung their tailored uniforms in their weapon-bearing vehicles, which were parked in a lot outside the perimeter: No physical barrier or guard post lay between Nelson and the free world. He was 35 miles from Mexico.

One day, in Nelson's telling, four U.S. marshals carrying automatic weapons showed up at the prison, ordered him to lie on the floor, manacled his hands and feet, drove him to Albuquerque and put him on a Con Air flight to Oklahoma City. The marshals answered no questions; they said they were just following orders. In Oklahoma City, Nelson and six other prisoners were escorted onto a plane bound for Illinois. Waiting at the airport when they arrived were dozens of law enforcement personnel: prison guards, state police with attack dogs, sharpshooters on the terminal roof. Riot officers in gas masks flanked each inmate and roughly ushered them onto a prison bus; if Nelson spoke, he was told, he would be gassed.

When the bus arrived at Tamms, the prisoners shuffled through a gauntlet of riot officers, who threw Nelson on the ground and cut his New Mexico prison uniform off him. He was given no explanation for the transfer; to this day he still has no idea why he was there. Shortly after he arrived, he was brought to a small concrete office, where two prison officials asked him, nonrhetorically, why he had been sent to Tamms. Nelson said he didn't know – he'd come from a minimum-security prison. Disbelieving, they asked what he'd done to warrant the transfer. He said he hadn't done anything. They didn't believe him, and his exemplary record in New Mexico availed him nothing.

Many top corrections officials believe that solitary confinement has little psychological effect on inmates. "In my experience, the men that are housed within this security housing unit have suffered no ill effects from their segregation," says Lewis, the warden at Pelican Bay. He notes that a psychiatrist visits the inmates once a month to make sure their mental health

COURTESY OF EASTERN STATE PENITENTIARY, 2

is "sound," and touts the beneficial effects of privileges like reading materials, TV and family visits. "People don't go crazy just because of the environment," says Jill Stevens, who worked for years as a mental-health clinician at Tamms. "They're more resilient than that." When I ask whether there might be a cumulative psychological effect on inmates who have spent years in solitary, Stevens is adamant: "For the solidly put-together people, absolutely not."

The problem is that most of the psychological damage to prisoners in solitary occurs invisibly, in silence and stillness. The effects may not become fully apparent until the inmates re-enter society, and prison personnel don't monitor the long-term mental health of former inmates; they have no sound clinical data on the psychological status of prisoners after their release. In its 1999 study, the Justice Department cautioned that virtually no information exists on the effects of long-term solitary confinement: "Little is known about the impact of locking an inmate in an isolated cell for an average of 23 hours per day with limited human interaction, little constructive activity and an environment that assures maximum control over the individual."

Brian Nelson was one of the first prisoners to be released after an extended stint at Tamms, and his parole agreement required him to undergo a psychiatric evaluation. Nelson says that Tamms officials told him, in so many words, that they wanted to know whether they'd created a monster. The first psychiatrist Nelson saw had no idea what to do for him; neither did the next nine. The 11th diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder and told him that, after a dozen years in solitary confinement, he was doing relatively well. At that point, Nelson was barely able to leave his mother's basement. Some months later, he was invited to address a meeting of the National Alliance on Mental Illness. Before a rapt audience of mental-health experts, he described his experience at Tamms. After the talk, he asked clinician after clinician whether they could help him. The response was the same each time. "No," they said. "But can we study you?"

SUCH WIDESPREAD IGNORANCE about the effects of solitary confinement is striking, given that the United States itself pioneered the practice nearly two centuries ago – and that the experiment was decisively proved inhumane by a century's worth of data. The first prison exclusively dedicated to solitary confinement was Eastern State Penitentiary, built in Philadelphia in 1829. Conceived by a group of prison reformers, Eastern State was inspired by Anglican and Quaker theology and designed to cultivate penitence and spiritual enlightenment. Inmates would not be subject to the rampant overcrowding and filth of common prisons. At Eastern State, hallways with 30-foot-high vaulted ceilings led to cells whose low doors forced prisoners to make a penitent's bow. Inmates spent 23 hours a day in clean, near-silent cells beneath a circular glass skylight known as the "eye of God." To prevent communication among prisoners, guards drew hoods over their heads before escorting them to their cells. This environment, reformers believed, would cleanse the prisoners of corrupting influences and engender reflection and repentance. Eastern State quickly became famous, serving as a model for more than 300 prisons in the United States and Europe.

The use of solitary was inspired by the Quakers, who believed it would bring prisoners closer to God.

Even before it was completed, though, there were signs that such confinement eroded mental health to the point of insanity. The warden at Auburn Prison in New York, which employed confinement practices comparable to those at Eastern State, had observed that "uninterrupted solitude" induced "mental anguish and distress." Some degree of discomfort might be "necessary to reform and humble the offender," he wrote, "but carry it too far, and he will either become a savage or sink into despair." Clinicians in Germany, which built multiple prisons modeled on Eastern State, attributed hundreds of cases of psychosis to solitary confinement, concluding that it caused "elementary hallucinations" and "suicidal and maniacal outbreaks."

In 1842, Charles Dickens toured Eastern State Penitentiary. He found the prisoners there "dead to everything except torturing anxieties and horrible despair," and observed a prisoner in his 11th year of confinement who would "stare at his hands and pick the flesh upon his fingers." Dickens denounced the system. "I am persuaded that those who designed [it]...do not know what it is they are doing," he wrote. "I hold this slow and daily tampering with the mysteries of the brain immeasurably worse than any torturing of the body."

By century's end, it was generally accepted that solitary confinement was uniquely cruel. In 1890, citing voluminous data on the psychological impact of solitary, the U.S. Supreme Court freed a convicted murderer rather than allow him to be held in isolation. Long-term segregation of prisoners was not "a mere unimportant regulation as to the safe-keeping of the prisoner," the court found. "A considerable number of the prisoners fell, after even a short confinement, into a semi-fatuous condition, from which it was next to impossible to arouse them, and others became violently insane; others, still, committed suicide; while those who withstood the ordeal better were not generally reformed, and in most cases did not recover sufficient mental activity to be of any subsequent service to the community."

Almost everything in today's psychological research about the effects of solitary confinement, it turns out, had already been documented by the end of the last century. The U. S. largely forswore the practice, and with few exceptions solitary confinement vanished for the next eight decades.

BRIAN NELSON'S CONDITION worsened with time. When he entered Tamms, he weighed 176 pounds; a year later, his appetite negligible and his pacing incessant, he was down to 119. His thinking had become obsessive. Once, when he was moved to a new cell, he spent days scrubbing it with a toothbrush. "It's hard to explain, but the cell is all you have," he says. "You clean it just so it's yours. Everything in it has to be in its place, everything has to be important."

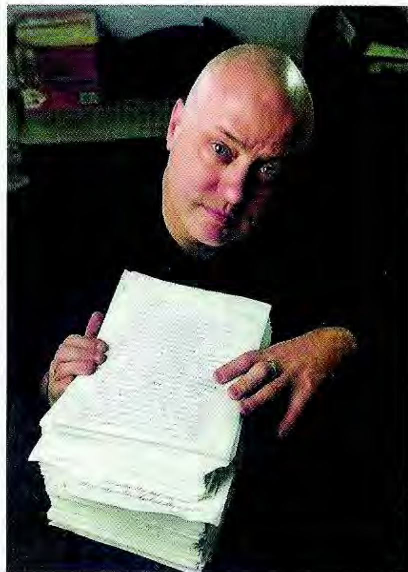
A psychiatrist who evaluated Nelson in 1999 under court order – Nelson had joined a lawsuit alleging inadequate psychological care – found that he was suffering from "a major depressive disorder." He was "nearly tearful throughout the interview," the psychiatrist reported, "displayed psychomotor retardation and hopelessness and refused to specifically answer questions regarding thoughts or plans to kill himself." Nelson was, in fact, having persistent suicidal thoughts, for the first time in his life. The psychiatrist recommended that he be removed from solitary immediately. Prison officials ignored the advice, and Nelson later tried to hang himself.

When inmates arrive in modern supermax cells, the psychological jeopardy into which they've been placed isn't always obvious. The cells are stark and small – typically 8 feet by 12 feet – but there is often some source of indirect natural light: a high slit of a window, a skylight in the gallery. The cells are generally clean, the temperature comfortable, the food monotonous but edible. If your conduct is good, you'll be permitted a TV or radio, reading material from friends and family or the prison library, and access to a commissary. Some inmates play games of chess between cells, yelling out moves to one another. After the chaos and dangers of life in the general population, solitary may, at first, feel like a relief.

But the designers of your environment have assumed that you are a monster. One of the architects of Pelican Bay, on which many supermaxes are modeled, has said that it was designed to hold Hannibal Lecter. You live in a cage you never leave, from which you can see nothing but the wall opposite your cell. "You sit there day after day in this gray box, and everything becomes gray," Nelson says. Except for a bolted-down stainless steel sink and toilet, everything in the cell is a molded shelf of solid poured concrete: a shelf for a bed, a shelf for a desk, a higher shelf for a TV. These structures are not just immovable but indivisible, reshapings of the walls around you, as if the liquid cement had been poured around a mold in the shape of the room's negative space. The wall opposite is of the same material – the entirety of your physical world seems composed of the same formulation of cement. A few months before Nelson's release, his mother asked him what color he wanted his room painted. He said he couldn't choose: It had become too difficult for him to imagine color.

Although the perforations in your cell door admit sound and light, they're too small to see through unless you're up against them, aligning each eye with a perforation, or closing one eye and looking through a single hole. The perforations can also induce a mind-irritating optical illusion, appearing to gain a dimension and spring toward you. The concrete environment refracts noise many times over: It can be hard to identify the source of a sound, fractured and muddied and sustained by echoes. Because the medium of communication is usually a yell, the ambient volume fluctuates wildly, swinging from sonic chaos to silence and back. Over time, the visual monotony and erratic acoustics become fatiguing and neurologically unsettling. Many inmates experience a degeneration of distance vision. They are rarely more than a dozen feet from a wall, and with nothing far off to focus on, their eye muscles atrophy.

When you leave your cell, you enter a wider box of poured concrete called a pod. Even here, the protocols are designed to subject you to total isolation: When it is time for you to shower or use the yard, a speaker conveys a guard's command, your electronically controlled door slides open, and you must walk to your destination without stopping to talk to your podmates, often keeping a prescribed distance from their cells. You won't be able to see them unless they walk right up to their doors, in which case they form silhouettes.



A Tortured Prayer

Inspired by the monks of old, Nelson treated his prison as a monastery. Alone in his cell, he spent one year, nine months and two days copying the Bible by hand.

Three times a day, meals are brought to your cell door, into which a sliding steel drawer is welded. When the guard arrives, you are ordered to stand away from the door; as you step back, it turns opaque. A food tray is inserted into the drawer, the drawer is pushed inward and locked into place, and the guard moves on.

Save illness, you need never leave the pod. Prisoners who remain in good condition and receive no visitors may not leave a pod for years.

TO STAY HEALTHY, THE MIND has to do what it evolved to do: constantly perceive, interpret and react to a stream of environmental and social stimuli. Cutting it off entirely produces mental torpor: Almost everything the brain is designed to process has vanished. After a few days in solitary, the EEG readings of prisoners predictably shift, in the words of one researcher, toward "an abnormal pattern characteristic of stupor and delirium" – the "semi-fatuous" state condemned by the U.S. Supreme Court in 1890.

As the days turn to weeks, the ability of prisoners in solitary to accurately process stimuli deteriorates. They become hypersensitive, startled and agitated by ordinary sounds or sights or smells – the buzzing of fluorescent lights, water rushing through plumbing pipes. A faint sound may morph into an imagined sound, of uncertain origin, which then assumes a vaguely ominous quality. Concentration and memory are inevitably impaired. Some inmates give up reading because they can't remember the contents of the previous page. It becomes harder to refocus your attention, which results in obsessional preoccupations – with a memory, a bodily sensation, minute accumulations of dust or dirt. You might fixate on a minor rash for hours. "You start going down different avenues in your mind," a former inmate tells me. "Some guys get lost, and they can't find their way back." According to researchers who have studied people held in solitary, such recurrent disordered thinking constitutes a form of trauma. Typical responses include mounting anger and frustration, chronic anxiety and panic attacks.

Repeated trauma lastingly alters the brain. Anger and anxiety provoke a prehistoric response: The adrenal gland releases hormones that trigger the firing of neurons in the brain's limbic structures, which react in a host of ways – by ordering the production of more coagulants, so we're less likely to bleed to death; by increasing muscle strength, so we can stab a predator with more force. When anxiety is chronic, as it is in solitary confinement, the adrenal gland produces more hormones, more quickly. The neural route between the adrenal gland and the limbic structures becomes more direct, and the limbic structures expand to accommodate the increase in signal volume. On brain scans, enlarged limbic systems light up with abnormal speed and brightness. Simultaneously, activity in the prefrontal cortex – responsible for judgment, analysis, a sense of conscience – decreases. Emotional impulses are thus far more powerful, and far less mediated. "One guy I knew, I thought he was mentally stronger than me, and he went straight caveman," says a former solitary inmate named Perry Hilson. "Smearing feces and eating them, cutting himself."

Brian Nelson shared his pod with several inmates who had become deeply disturbed. During his first six months at Tamms, he says, guards repeatedly used tear gas to subdue inmates who refused to return food trays, or flooded their cells, or attempted suicide. Instruments of self-mutilation were hard to come by, but prisoners found ways. Some sharpened paint flakes or pieces of caulk into dull knives;

RICH CHAPMAN/"CHICAGO SUN-TIMES"

an inmate whom Nelson considered a friend cut himself so frequently that the scars on his arms looked like "train tracks." One inmate cut off his finger. Another picked off and ate pieces of his own skin, repeatedly sliced his scrotum, and finally cut off one of his testicles and tied it to his cell door. Self-mutilation in the adult male prison population, according to researcher Terry Kupers, occurs only rarely outside solitary confinement.

Many of the suicide attempts at Tamms involved acts of incredible willpower. For a week, a friend of Nelson's practiced falling asleep every night with a plastic bag over his head, apparently conditioning his mind not to rebel when he did it for real; he succeeded to the point of unconsciousness, but was found, barely breathing, hours later. Another inmate tore his jumpsuit into strips and used some of them to jam his door shut so he couldn't be pulled out. He used the rest to weave a noose that he tied to the door – low enough that he had to bend and lock his knees for his body to drop. He succeeded. Another prisoner climbed onto the desk in his cell and let himself fall backward so that his head smashed into the concrete floor; he was hospitalized with a fractured skull but didn't die. He told his lawyer and the medical staff that this was a rational act – he preferred to die rather than spend the rest of his life in solitary. Fewer than eight percent of all inmates in the U.S. are in long-term segregation, but 50 percent of all prison suicides occur there.

To Nelson, the clearest indicator of the psychological state of the inmates at Tamms was the number of strap-down beds in the infirmary. When he first arrived, he says, the infirmary had one. It soon added three more, and then an additional four. By the time he was released, it had 12.

SOLITARY CONFINEMENT exacts its toll even on prisoners who start off healthy. "Individuals with more stable personalities and stronger cognitive functioning," one researcher has written, "will still experience some degree of stupor, difficulties with thinking and concentration, obsessional thinking, agitation, irritability and difficulty tolerating external stimuli." Many report a moment of terrifying clarity: the sudden realization that they are losing their minds and slipping into psychosis. "Because you don't get the stimulus and contact that you need, you get into that self-speak, that inner voice, and you enter a period of regression," says a former inmate named Jeremy Herman. "I could feel it coming on, and I thought, 'I gotta tighten my grip or I'm gonna drown.'" The same thing happened to Nelson. As he watched himself waste away – as his thinking moved further and further beyond his control – he grasped that he "had to get my mind right."

Every former prisoner I spoke to coped with growing insanity in the only way available to them. "What saves your life," Herman says, "is a routine." To approximate the vitalizing effect of the outside world, inmates in solitary devise a regimen of continuous, rigorous activity. From the moment they wake up until the moment they fall asleep, they strive for purposeful attention. A passive mind – a daydreaming mind or TV-watching mind – is a self-harming mind. "If you stay in that cell in your mind, and you know you can't go nowhere, you'll lose it," says a former inmate named Tony Rodriguez, whose stint at Tamms overlapped with Nelson's. "You'll become a victim of the environment. I wasn't going to do that. I wasn't going to fail myself."

Inmates ward off growing insanity in the only way available to them: "What saves your life is a routine."

One of the first things Rodriguez did to keep his mind alive was count whatever he could see. "Count perforation holes in the door," he says (there were 476), "count the cracks in the walls, count the bricks, count the steps as you pace your cell. I counted all the pores – where bubbles in the cement dry and leave air pockets – in one side of the wall." He woke up at 4 a.m. to brush his teeth and wash off before breakfast, which came at 4:30 a.m., then devoted the rest of the morning to reading and drawing. He read the Bible cover to cover twice during his dozen years in Tamms, as well as textbooks on anatomy, physiology and nutrition; fantasy novels like *The Lord of the Rings* took him out of the present. He also became a skilled artist, deriving colored ink by dropping M&M's and Skittles into a shampoo bottle cap filled with water, then stirring gently until the candy released its pigment. His paintbrush was a converted ink tube separated from a pen, topped with an arrowhead of sponge custom-cut in the shower with toenail clippers.

After lunch, Rodriguez would take a brief nap before writing letters, studying, playing chess with a podmate and working out for two hours. He did pushups on the floor, and pullups and leg raises while hanging from the TV shelf. He strapped a laundry bag full of books to each wrist for arm curls. Then the obstacle course: "I started at the door and ran to the bed, jumped on it, ran along it and jumped on the desk, jumped down, jumped on the sink, climbed up on the TV stand and jumped down the opposite way. I did it like 25 times, and by the time it was over my legs were killing me." After working out, he would rinse off, eat dinner and start winding down for bed. He was exhausted.

When Brian Nelson was at Tamms, he woke up two hours before Rodriguez, by 2 a.m., to pray the entire rosary, meditating on the Sorrowful, Joyful, Glorious and Luminous Mysteries. Nelson had been raised Catholic, but at Tamms he attained a new level of devotion. The rosary initiated seven hours of daily prayer, alternating with work, study and exercise. At 3:15 a.m., Nelson began praying the Daily Office. He ran in place until breakfast, then set to work copying religious texts by hand. Meals and six more prayer sessions punctuated the work. After 7:30 each night, he refrained from speaking. He prayed for the last time at midnight.

Nelson had been inspired by the writer and monk Thomas Merton, and by his own correspondence with the Cistercian monks at the Abbey of Gethsemani, in Kentucky. Around A.D. 1,000, a group of Benedictine monks had become alienated by their order's lax adherence to the rigorous, abstemious Rule of St. Benedict, written five centuries earlier. The Cistercians, as they called themselves, sought to replicate monastic life as it had been lived in St. Benedict's time, with an emphasis on asceticism and manual labor. Nelson, who had attended St. Benedict's Elementary School in Chicago, was praying from his breviary one evening when it occurred to him that solitary offered him an opportunity to follow the Rule of St. Benedict in the manner of a Cistercian purist a thousand years earlier.

"*Ora et labora* – that's Latin for 'prayer and work,'" he says. "You do your prayers and you do your work. What's the work of the monks from the old days? They copied the texts and passed them on."

Nelson wrote out the novella-length Rule of St. Benedict by hand, three times.

He moved on to the Roman Catechism, and then to the Holy Bible, which took him one year, nine months and two days to copy. For Nelson, copying was learning. He contemplated everything he wrote. After he finished the Bible, he began working through a Cistercian religious curriculum. "Some of it you could only read in Latin," he recalls. "One of the hardest things I ever did? Sitting down with a Latin-English dictionary. But it helped me survive. It's time-consuming." In solitary, nothing is more valuable than the unremarked passage of time.

To be afforded a proper monastic diet, Nelson sued the state. During a hearing with a skeptical district attorney, Nelson pulled out sections of his hand-copied Bible, each in a manila envelope. One by one, he pushed them across the table. "This is Genesis to Exodus," he said. "Here's Exodus to Job, and here's Job through Esther."

"This is your writing?" the prosecutor asked, flipping through the stacks of paper.

"I'm almost to the third book of Peter," Nelson said. Within 24 hours, he was granted a Catholic diet.

Monastic penance involved self-flagellation, but Nelson had no flogging implement. He took the cord from his iPod earbuds, tied a series of knots in it to make a scourge, and ritually whipped himself. He was briefly put on suicide watch, but convinced the prison's mental-health staff that flogging was a form of worship, and continued his project of converting Tamms into a monastery.

On October 4th of this year, the Illinois Prisoner Review Board released Brian Nelson from parole. To the Illinois Department of Corrections, he was already a success story: At the request of prison officials, he had spoken to fellow parolees through a reintegration program called Summit of Hope. In the many endorsement letters Nelson submitted to the parole board, supporters called him a "mature, dedicated employee" who was doing a "wonderful job," an "eloquent orator about the damage done to prisoners," and a "valued member of the criminal justice reform community" with a "strong network of family and close friends."

Nelson's success beyond the confines of solitary is a product of his innate resilience and unfathomable discipline in prison, and of an almost maniacal work ethic. But it is also dependent on the unusual, nearly nonreplicable circumstances in which he finds himself. As a paralegal at the Uptown People's Law Center, he turns his personal experience into a professional advantage, evaluating prisoner grievances and determining which ones are credible and deserve to be litigated. Everyone he works with at the center understands that his psychological wounds can disable him unpredictably for an hour or an afternoon or a day. A letter or phone call or photograph can re-traumatize him. Sometimes Nelson arrives at work before anyone else, sequesters himself in his office all day, talking to almost no one, then discreetly slips home. Sometimes he doesn't answer the phone.

The day after I first interviewed Nelson, I went to his office to do a second interview and talk with his colleagues. I ended up interviewing a co-worker first. During the interview, she took a call. "Oh, really?" she said casually. "OK." She hung up and announced, "Brian flipped out. Someone's taking him home."

I spoke to Nelson the next day. "The minute I saw you yesterday at the law center," he explained, "I got so *sick*, so *violently sick*, that I was throwing up from one end of the office to the other. Everyone's asking me what's wrong, and I said, 'I just can't do it – I can't go back to the cell.'" The prospect of recalling his experience was enough to provoke a violent physical reaction. When he got home, he lay down in a dark room, alone.

Former inmates often re-create the conditions of their confinement for the rest of their lives.

Unlike Nelson, most inmates who are released after years in solitary confinement cannot use their incarceration as a professional asset; most do not find colleagues who understand the source and nature of their trauma. Stuart Grassian, a leading researcher on solitary confinement, believes that some of its effects are probably permanent, even for those who relearn how to function in society. The most common of these, he has written, is a "continued intolerance of social interaction."

Every former inmate I meet, no matter how long he has been out of solitary, has little tolerance for sustained socializing, and even less for crowds. "My most fucked-up moment," one tells me, "was when my mom wanted to buy me clothes and took me to the mall. I walked in and there was so many people walking around and brushing up against me. I felt like a little four-year-old boy. Like, 'Mom, come get me!' I just stood right there until she came and got me." Some give up trying to socialize and stay with relatives, often sequestering themselves in an exclusive zone within the home. Former solitary inmates may recapitulate the conditions of their confinement, in a gentler form, for the rest of their lives. After leaving Tamms and moving in with his mother, one of the first things Brian Nelson did was lock the two basement doors leading to his bedroom.

Later, when I visit Nelson in his office, I decide to spare him any further trauma and ask only about the present. He works on the second floor of a walk-up that the law center uses as an annex. There are only two other offices, and Nelson feels safe here. If he isn't up to it, he doesn't have to deal with the rest of the staff.

"Welcome to the sanctuary," he says as he leads me in, wearing a Chicago Cubs jersey and black cargo pants. "This is the hide-out. I call it 'my cell.'" The office is small and stark: blank white walls, a high transom window, a fluorescent overhead light, an old wooden desk and two bookcases full of legal volumes: *Illinois Compiled Statutes Annotated, Northern District Court Prison Litigation Handbook*. Beneath the bookshelves sits a cardboard box full of books and a can of Wildwood grape soda.

Nelson is constantly reading and answering letters from inmates at Tamms, assessing their complaints and setting up legal calls. On his desk are stacks of letters and a legal pad with a long list of inmates he has yet to write back. Sitting down at the desk, he picks up a letter from a friend who is still in solitary. "When I write him, I been there," Nelson says. "I know exactly what the cell looks like." He tells me he has promised himself that he will never forget the inmates in Tamms, and that the environment of his office helps him feel closer to them.

I notice that the cardboard box on the floor contains religious texts and books on Catholicism: *Codex Sinaiticus, Bernard of Clairvaux: Essential Writings*. I ask him about them. "Sometimes something triggers me and I can't deal with legal stuff," he says. "So I'll just go back to my cell – my mom doesn't know this – and lock myself in and go back to my reading. It's my escape."